

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2007

Focus on Participation



Global Information Society Watch

2007



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United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)

Seán Ó Siochrú

Introduction

Objectives and main activities

According to its Constitution, the purpose of UNESCO¹ is:

...to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion, by the Charter of the United Nations (UNESCO, 2004).

More informally, its website describes its functions as a laboratory of ideas and a standard setter to forge agreements on emerging ethical issues, and as a clearinghouse for the dissemination and sharing of information and knowledge; it helps member states to build human and institutional capacities, and promotes international cooperation among its members in the fields of education, science, culture and communication.

UNESCO's main activities comprise prospective studies; transfer and sharing of knowledge; standards setting, including international and statutory instruments (declarations, conventions and recommendations); the provision of expertise to member states; and the exchange of specialised information.

Unlike some UN agencies, UNESCO did not emerge from a pragmatic need on the part of governments to coordinate their relations in a specific domain (such as the common management of the seas, or the coordination of post and of telecommunication). Rather, in the aftermath of the Second World War (1939-1945), it was founded on a broader idealist philosophy that "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed." Such a remit has sometimes led it into highly politicised territory which, in the absence of a strong imperative on governments to continue engagement, can lead to some institutional fragility, a case in point being the withdrawal from UNESCO of the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) during the 1980s (both have since rejoined, as will be discussed below).

Legal/constitutional composition

UNESCO was founded in November 1945 as a specialised UN agency (under Articles 104, 105 of the UN Charter, agreed a few months earlier), and is guided by its Constitution.

WEBSITE: www.unesco.org
HEADQUARTERS: Paris, France
FOUNDED: 1945
UN STATUS: UN specialised agency
TYPE: Intergovernmental organisation (192 member states and 6 associate members)

Key members/participants and decision-making structures

UNESCO currently has 192 member states and 6 associate members. UN membership automatically confers the right to membership of UNESCO.²

The UNESCO General Conference comprises representatives from member states. It meets every two years to determine the policies and main lines of work of the organisation and is attended by member states and associate members, together with observers for non-member states, intergovernmental organisations, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Each country has one vote, irrespective of its size or the extent of its contribution to the budget.

The General Conference sets out the programmes and the budget of UNESCO, elects members of the Executive Board and appoints, every four years, the director-general.

The Executive Board, comprising 58 elected members, meets twice a year and in effect manages UNESCO, implementing the tasks assigned by the General Conference every two years. Other Board functions stem from agreements concluded between UNESCO and the UN, the specialised agencies, and other intergovernmental organisations.

The director-general is the executive head of the organisation.

Relations with other international institutions and the multilateral system

As a specialised UN agency, its formal links are generally established through the UN system, and in particular the Economic and Social Committee (ECOSOC).³ Members of other UN agencies have a right to attend UNESCO conferences and other events.

Its remit regularly brings it into collaboration with other specialised agencies and UN programmes, and such collaboration is frequent and often over an extended period, for instance, with the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

² The list of UNESCO member states is available from: <erc.unesco.org/cp/MSList_alpha.asp?lg=E>.

³ <www.un.org/docs/ecosoc>.

¹ <www.unesco.org>.

Commitment to development

The UNESCO Constitution and later legal instruments do not specifically refer to a commitment to development, and indeed development per se is not among its key goals. However, many of its declarations, conventions and recommendations do have implicit and explicit developmental components, and developing countries are often singled out for special support.

Its programmes prioritise least-developed countries (LDCs) and poverty reduction. The Medium-Term Strategy for 2002-2007 includes a cross-cutting theme on “Eradication of poverty, especially extreme poverty”, and a specific commitment to prioritise LDCs across all its programmes (UNESCO, 2002a).

Programme V on Communication and Information, for instance, gives priority attention to the needs of LDCs and Africa “in such areas as capacity-building, ICT applications in community development including water management and ICT literacy, to sustain UNESCO’s contribution to NEPAD [New Partnership for Africa’s Development]” (UNESCO, 2006a).

UNESCO also frequently facilitates the participation of actors from developing countries in its meetings and events, by supporting travel and subsistence and by organising global and regional events in developing countries.

Commitment to gender equality

Similarly, UNESCO does not have a core legal instrument regarding gender equality, but its gender mainstreaming policy is defined in the organisation’s Medium-Term Strategy for 2002-2007. In addition, UNESCO’s Gender Mainstreaming Implementation Framework (GMIF) for 2002-2007 offers guidelines on how to implement the policy commitment (UNESCO, 2002b).

The framework was developed by the Section for Women and Gender Equality, with a staff of four and linked to designated gender focal points in Paris and field offices. Its goal is the overall integration of gender equality issues within UNESCO’s programmes, and it also maintains a Mainstreaming Resource Centre directed towards supporting policy-makers in this area.

Within the Communication and Information Programme, gender concerns have been mainstreamed with special emphasis on “training, improving community access to information, knowledge and skills and increasing the capacity of professionals to produce and disseminate development messages” (UNESCO, 2006a).

Southern actors and civil society participation

The UNESCO Constitution defines the basis for cooperation with NGOs. UNESCO “may make suitable arrangements for consultation and cooperation with non-governmental organisations concerned with matters within its competence, and may invite them to undertake specific tasks. Such cooperation may also include appropriate participation by representatives of such organisations on advisory committees set up by the General Conference” (UNESCO, 2004, Article 11, para. 4).

Over the years, UNESCO has developed (and occasionally reviewed and amended) an elaborate system of NGO participation

– some say at times too elaborate – and General Conference Directives of 1995 and 2001 govern the current situation. Relations can be of two kinds, formal or operational, depending on the role and structure of the NGO concerned and their record on cooperation.

At present UNESCO maintains official relations with 337 international NGOs and 26 foundations. Of these, about 15% are based in developing countries, just a handful in the least developed. Although many are international associations with members globally, it is still a small proportion.

A feature unique to UNESCO is the UNESCO Clubs and Associations established at the national level to informally engage a wide range of actors on UNESCO issues; these actors may also participate in UNESCO as NGOs. There are now 4,000 associations, centres and clubs in about 100 countries, and at the international level, a World Federation of UNESCO Clubs, Centres and Associations (WFUCA).⁴

Official UNESCO Commissions also exist in all 192 member states and can act as a means to extend outreach into civil society at the national level. These are governed under a specific charter approved by the General Conference in 1978, and their function is “to involve in UNESCO’s activities the various ministerial departments, agencies, institutions, organisations and individuals working for the advancement of education, science, culture and information” (UNESCO, 2002c).

With regard to participation of Southern actors, UNESCO, as noted, has no specific structural features but has a stated commitment to support such actors and builds in participation through a variety of modalities.

Role and responsibilities in ICTs

Legal and constitutional basis

Communication is the central instrument by which UNESCO achieves its mission. Article 1 of the Constitution states that to realise this purpose the organisation will “(a) Collaborate in the work of advancing the mutual knowledge and understanding of peoples, through all means of mass communication and to that end recommend such international agreements as may be necessary to promote the free flow of ideas by word and image.”

ICT-related activities

Given such a general remit, it is not surprising that UNESCO has been involved – and occasionally embroiled – in information and communications technology (ICT) and media issues throughout its evolution.

From the late 1960s, satellite broadcasting across borders was a key political issue, and UNESCO responded in 1972 with the adoption of the Declaration of Guiding Principles on the Use of Satellite Broadcasting for the Free Flow of Information, the Spread of Education and Greater Cultural Exchange (UNESCO, 1972). Although promoting the principle of free flow, it also affirmed the principle of national prior

4 More information available from: <portal.unesco.org/unesco/ev.php?URL_ID=17389&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201&reload=1069844420>.

consent. As a declaration it was not binding, but the list of seven countries opposing it – they included the UK, the US, Australia, Germany and Canada – suggests that a cold war fracture was already opening. In 1974, along with WIPO, UNESCO oversaw a further convention on satellites, the purpose of which was to protect copyright owners of broadcast signals; the Convention Relating to the Distribution of Programme-Carrying Signals Transmitted by Satellite came into force in 1979. To some extent the contrast between these instruments is indicative of a shift in concerns away from balancing sovereignty against free flow, towards an emphasis on property rights, a move that was part of a wider global dynamic.

However, international differences in these instruments were merely a prelude to UNESCO's involvement in the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) debate. This debate, initiated in the mid-1970s and led initially by the Non-Aligned Movement,⁵ focused on the impact of Northern-dominated media on development, though many other issues were involved at different stages. UNESCO took it up in 1976, and in 1978 the General Conference agreed a Declaration of Fundamental Principles concerning the Contribution of the Mass Media to Strengthening Peace and International Understanding, to the Promotion of Human Rights and to Countering Racism, Apartheid and Incitement to War.

Despite this agreement, major divisions soon emerged and an independent commission was established to come forward with recommendations. The result was a report called *Many Voices, One World*, presented to the General Conference in 1980 (MacBride *et al.* 1980). It considered media and communication in the widest sense and put forward a series of proposals. Unfortunately, the debate became embroiled in cold war politics, and distorted by commercial and political media interests, descending rapidly into fractious argument. Largely as a result, the US pulled out of UNESCO in 1984, followed by the UK, its strongest ally, the following year. Although NWICO continued on the UNESCO agenda for some time, it was finally replaced, following a vigorous debate at the 1989 General Conference, by the New Communication Strategy. Neither UNESCO nor any other UN institution has since hosted such a wide-ranging debate on media and communication.

In 1990, as a result of an internal restructuring exercise, UNESCO's Communication and Information Sector (CI) was established, consisting of the Communications Development Division, the Division for Freedom of Expression, Democracy and Peace, and the Information Society Division.

The CI provides the secretariat for two intergovernmental programmes: the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) and the Information for All Programme (IFAP).

The IPDC, established in 1980, was seen by many as a pragmatic alternative to NWICO. In its first 25 years, it has dispensed USD 92 million to more than 1,100 media development projects, granting just over USD 3 million to 120 national and regional projects globally

in the year 2004/2005. The IFAP was established in 2001 as a platform for debate and action to help reduce the "digital divide" and to promote universal access. It has so far generated almost USD 2 million in funds, and approved 24 projects during 2005.

Each programme has a board consisting of a number of member states (39 for IPDC and 26 for IFAP), elected by the General Conference.

Operationally, the CI implements a set of actions that include funding Chairs in Informatics, supporting electronic educational networks, digitising public domain information, training in ICTs, offering advice on developing information policies, and running, with the ITU, Regional Symposiums on Telematics for Development. Some actions are undertaken in conjunction with other entities, such as the ITU and UNDP, where their remit overlaps. One example is the May 1995 study published jointly with the ITU, *The Right to Communicate: At What Price?* (UNESCO, 1995), which considered the economic constraints on the effective use of telecommunication in education, science and culture.

The Community Multimedia Centre (CMC) programme is among the CI flagships. Up to 90 centres have now been supported in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and South Asia, as the programme continues to expand elsewhere. Each centre provides rural and remote communities with radio, internet and other ICT facilities for knowledge sharing and development.

Other recent UNESCO intergovernmental actions are of at least tangential relevance. In October 2003, the General Conference approved the Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace,⁶ covering issues such as universal access to the internet, copyright and the public domain, and the balance between the interests of rights-holders and of the public. A recommendation, however, is not binding, and the language used is relatively weak.

The Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions was approved by the General Conference in October 2005. It was in part promoted as a means to ensure that cultural expressions, including audio and visual materials, could be fully defended in the context of trade agreements, such as those agreed in the World Trade Organisation (WTO), which many believe are undermining their cultural value in the interests of trade and commercial gain. The Convention was opposed primarily by the US.

UNESCO and the WSIS

The legal basis for UNESCO participation in the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) was never in doubt, given the strong remit in its Constitution and the existence of an Information Society Division in the CI Sector.

It is worth recalling that some time before the ITU announced in 1998 its intention to organise the WSIS, UNESCO had been developing its own plans for a summit. In August 1996, instigated by the director-general, the UNESCO Executive Board began planning a Conference on Information and Communication for Development, to be

5 The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) is an international organisation of states – over 100 – not formally aligned with or against any power bloc.

6 Available from: <portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13475&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html>.

held in 1998, the goal of which was to “focus on development issues to which information and communication can make a meaningful contribution and (...) provide a forum for all who wish to contribute to the search for international consensus in these matters” (UNESCO, 1996a).

In November the Executive Board agreed that “The possibility of co-organising the conference jointly with other bodies within the UN system, such as ITU, would be actively explored” (UNESCO, 1996b).

Why UNESCO dropped the idea of the conference has never been publicly explained, although some within UNESCO view it as the origin of the idea of an intergovernmental event on the information society. The internal consideration by UNESCO of such a conference enabled a rapid and coherent response to the ITU initiative, and UNESCO was thus a very early and active contributor to the WSIS preparatory process.

From the beginning, UNESCO’s goal was to broaden the agenda of the WSIS, and to extend civil society participation. Although not officially acknowledged, some in UNESCO shared the view of early civil society participants that the ITU’s understanding of the information society overemphasised infrastructure and technical aspects. Furthermore, the ITU’s unique structure, which encourages active participation from the private sector but refuses (in contravention of ECOSOC agreements) to officially recognise NGOs, left it ill equipped to negotiate the participation of civil society.⁷

The early stages of a summit routinely involve a process of agenda-definition as the lead agency, in this case the ITU, brings in and opens a dialogue with additional UN actors. UNESCO’s efforts in this regard focused on delivering a consistent message in all its activities under the theme “Towards Knowledge Societies” and four underlying principles: freedom of expression, universal access to information and knowledge, promotion of cultural diversity, and equal access to quality education. In general the intention was to concentrate on content and human-capacity issues associated with an information society, and this was evident in almost all its actions. Furthermore, UNESCO, unlike for instance the UNDP, took the opportunity of the WSIS to reinforce its ICT programmes.

In relation to supporting civil society, UNESCO participated actively in the first civil society event relating to the WSIS, held in November 2001 in Geneva, jointly organised by the Platform for Communication Rights and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. UNESCO’S participation in this seminar – entitled “Communication as a Human Right in the Information Society: Issues for the World Summit on the Information Society” – signalled its support for a broad and participatory approach to the Summit.

Soon after, UNESCO organised a round of consultations with NGOs on the WSIS. The consultations were held in Paris over four separate days in February 2002. Although the lack of funding for travel and subsistence resulted in little participation from the South, the event facilitated the process of civil society coalescing around the WSIS. This was followed up in April with a two-day consultation, this time offering some support for Southern participation in an event that of-

fered a platform for civil society to further develop their ideas. The outcomes, in terms of both proposed modalities of civil society participation in the WSIS and the substantive issues to be included, had a significant influence on civil society activities overall during the early WSIS phase and formed the point of departure for discussions at the first meeting of the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) in July that year. UNESCO went on to support an online discussion forum for civil society from December 2002 until January 2003, although participation in this case was relatively limited. By then, in any case, civil society was well into the process of organising itself into various caucuses and others groups, and was developing its own communication structures.

More generally, UNESCO took considerable pains to redirect and refocus its programme activities to fit into the WSIS and its “Knowledge Societies” agenda, especially through the design and refinement of the CI component of the 2002-2007 Medium-Term Strategy.⁸ Some required little more than relabelling of existing activities; others were entirely new.

In the first WSIS preparatory phase, UNESCO published a series of reports on different aspects of the information society; hosted a Ministerial Round Table Meeting alongside its October 2003 General Conference from which a communiqué, *Towards Knowledge Societies*, was issued; organised a High-Level Symposium on the eve of the Geneva Summit meeting in December 2003 that brought together 40 ministers, most from the South; and sponsored seven side-events at the Geneva Summit itself.⁹

During the second phase, significant UNESCO activities included a series of thematic meetings in 2005, including two in Paris, one in Mali and one in Russia; the publication of *Towards Knowledge Societies: UNESCO World Report*, also in 2005 (UNESCO, 2005); and a further set of events at the Tunis Summit.

Description and analysis of ICT activities

UNESCO actions since the Tunis Summit

UNESCO’S new Medium-Term Strategy for the years 2007 to 2013 is currently in advanced draft form, to be approved at the next General Conference. Programme V on Information and Communication has, according to senior staff, been structured to a very significant degree around those areas of the WSIS Action Plan for which UNESCO is the focal point.

Action lines

Under the Tunis Agenda and the subsequent consultation on Action Plan moderators/facilitators held on 24 February 2006, UNESCO was assigned the role of interim focal point for four of the eleven full action lines contained in the WSIS Plan of Action, along with two of the eight ICT application areas grouped under action line C7. No other agency was given such a numerically prominent role in relation to the

7 For documentation on an attempt to force ITU to open up to NGOs see: <www.comunica.org/itu_nngo>.

8 For a complete list see: <www.unesco.org/wsisdirectory>.

9 More information is available from: <portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13013&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html>.

action lines, underscoring again the extent to which the WSIS agenda overlapped with that of UNESCO. These action lines are:

- C3: Access to information and knowledge
- C7: ICT applications (two areas: e-learning and e-science)
- C8: Cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content
- C9: Media
- C10: Ethical dimensions of the information society

Initial meetings were held during 2006 in all of these areas, beginning with C8 on 12 May in Geneva; then C3, C10, C7 (e-learning) and C9 in Paris on four consecutive days beginning on 16 October; and finally C7 (e-science) on 22 October in Beijing, alongside a major science and technology conference taking place there.

The purpose of the meetings was to constitute multi-stakeholder teams to move forward with each of the action lines, including designating a facilitator and sub-group moderators, devising terms of reference, and deciding on the activities to be pursued. No specific resources were available from UNESCO or other parties to facilitate the working of the team, and the facilitator is explicitly expected to be able to provide sufficient resources to cover the costs of his/her own activities. In all cases, UNESCO was confirmed by acclamation in its role as focal point for the specified action lines.

The WSIS action lines vary greatly in terms of their breadth of scope and the precision of their focus. They also differ in the extent to which the elements of the Action Plan are already underway and contained in the plans of UNESCO and other organisations. These factors were reflected in the meetings, as they will be in any eventual outcomes.

C3: Access to knowledge, for instance, is a key area with ten distinct actions, most of which are quite precise and well within the domain of UNESCO and other collaborating entities. Actions include: a) Develop policy guidelines for the development and promotion of public domain information and h) Support the creation and development of a digital public library and archive services.

C9: Media, on the other hand, includes seven actions, most of which are quite vague and/or general, such as a) Encourage the media to continue to play an important role in the information society and c) Take appropriate measures – consistent with freedom of expression – to combat illegal and harmful content in media content. Similarly, *C10: Ethical dimensions* has four actions including a) Take steps to promote respect for peace and to uphold the fundamental values of freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, shared responsibility, and respect for nature and b) All stakeholders should increase their awareness of the ethical dimension of their use of ICTs. And *C8: Cultural diversity* has a total of fifteen disparate actions covering hugely different areas and qualitatively different in nature.

Indeed, most of the actions within each area are disconnected, and often the implicit comprehension of the domains covered does not reflect actual good practice on the ground.

Thus UNESCO and the multi-stakeholder teams face a significant challenge in developing coherent sub-groups and focused ac-

tions. Meetings took different approaches. Some action lines broke into sub-groups to develop more specific activities; others stayed in plenary. Plenary discussion often opened out into general issues, and lists of desirable actions, before being pulled in by the chair. For the most part, they were conducted in a traditional and formal manner with tight chairing and facilitation and considerable discretionary power in the hands of the chair to continue or discontinue a subject and to wrap up with a specific conclusion.

Each of the action lines did establish multi-stakeholder teams to carry them forward, some with quite specific goals, though few if any at this point comprise all key actors necessary to push forward their domain of work. Civil society participation overall was relatively weak as compared to the level seen during the WSIS itself, and the number of participants from the South was limited, though they were vocal in most meetings. The absence of specific funding to defray the cost of participation may have contributed to the low numbers overall, especially of civil society and Southern representatives, but with a few exceptions the level of enthusiasm was muted and it proved difficult to establish an energetic consensus on moving forward.

UNESCO is organising an online platform for ongoing discussion, and collaboration is also being organised to facilitate further team development.

Prospects for implementation

UNESCO, in common with all participating organisations, faces a difficult task in implementing these action lines. Some obstacles, such as lack of precision and a very general focus, may be overcome through concerted effort on the part of the multi-stakeholder teams. Others, however, pose more serious challenges.

Almost all action areas are already the subject of considerable activity, unrelated to the WSIS, among academics, NGOs, the private sector, intergovernmental bodies, national bodies and so forth, many of whom would be almost entirely unaware of the WSIS. Given the lack of new resources, the multi-stakeholder teams are not in a position to influence their respective domains through the launch of major new actions. And there already exist several bodies through which actors cooperate and form partnerships, coordinate their activities, exchange experiences, and so forth, such as the Global Knowledge Partnership (GKP), the Global Alliance for ICT and Development (GAID), and indeed the intergovernmental agencies themselves. How can relatively small numbers of somewhat disparate multi-stakeholder teams hope to bring some value-added to this field? What can they offer that will make a difference?

The immediate outcomes of these meetings suggest that such an impact may be possible, but only in relatively few and quite specific areas, in which key organisations and entities already have a considerable stake, in which niche needs are not currently being addressed, and in which genuine collaborations can be nurtured with clear goals and outcomes.

Such actions might be found under action lines 3, 7 and 8, and probably less so under action lines 9 and 10. However, any positive outcomes will depend largely on how actively and creatively the

multi-stakeholder teams approach the task, and the resources they can mobilise.

The potential scale of outcomes, at least in these action lines, emerging from a global process of several years' duration that consumed an enormous amount of time and funds, seems modest in the extreme. Some in UNESCO believe that much of the WSIS' impact may be generated by less explicit and visible means, through the extensive networking that took place and will be reinforced on the ground, regionally, nationally and even locally. However, it is difficult to produce evidence of this, especially given that there are already so many other networking activities. Evidence is also scarce, at a higher level, of a development impact of the WSIS through integration into the wider development context, since the participation of core development actors – such as the relevant government ministries, key donor organisations and NGOs – in the overall WSIS preparatory process, Summits and follow-up was, and remains, limited.

Other activities relating to the WSIS

UNESCO is a member of the UN Group on the Information Society (UNGIS) established by the UN secretary-general. It is set up as a mechanism to coordinate interagency implementation and to link the WSIS to other development modalities such as the Millennium Development Goals. Its first meeting was held in Geneva on 14 July 2006, chaired by the ITU secretary-general. UNESCO is one of three vice-chairs, and will take the chair from July 2007, followed by the UNDP.¹⁰

UNESCO also participates in the work of the Internet Governance Forum, advocating an open, transparent and inclusive approach to the issue. Specific topics of interest include ethical dimensions, multilingualism on the internet and capacity building.

Finally, UNESCO continues with its work with the Partnership for the Measuring of ICT for Development, focusing on indicators relating to its core concerns.

Other ICT-related activities

UNESCO has attempted, in the latter years of its 2001-2007 Medium-Term Strategy and in the entirety of its forthcoming Strategy, to bring its ICT-related activities within the general outcomes of the WSIS. However, several major programmes began before the first Summit, and are continuing thereafter. Recent developments in the most important of these are considered here.

Both the Information for All Programme (IFAP) and the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) have recently been through evaluation processes. The former is not yet completed but the outcome may bring it closer to the WSIS implementation activities.

IFAP at present faces a number of challenges, among them that it has very limited ongoing funding, its focus is not altogether clear, and there are questions concerning the strategic value of funding modest and relatively isolated projects. The evaluation, to be completed in early

2007, considers whether the focus should be placed more firmly on policy-related actions, marking a clear distinction from IPDC's strong project focus.

The structure of IFAP as a UN commission offers some possibilities, since it has a mandate to form national committees. The IFAP Bureau secretary also holds the post of Information Society director within CI; and the IFAP Council advises UNESCO on information society issues. Thus one option under consideration is to reposition IFAP as the coordinating vehicle for implementing UNESCO's role in the WSIS. The national committees could play a key role in convening national actors and multi-stakeholder teams under the action lines, while at the institutional level, the Bureau could play a horizontal coordinating role while bringing together government and international non-governmental actors.

Indeed, its mandate lends itself so well to a coordinating role in the information society that some see the failure to propose IFAP as the follow-up mechanism for WSIS, a role that was given to the Commission on Science and Technology for Development, as an opportunity lost.

In the case of IPDC, reforms initiated in 2002 included a higher priority for projects promoting press freedom and media pluralism, community media, professional capacity and partnerships; the IPDC Council will now meet bi-annually instead of annually; the Bureau fully takes over selecting and financing projects; and field office advisers will assume greater responsibilities. The evaluators (Ronning and Orgeret, 2006, p. 8) concluded that "significant and impressive changes have taken place within IPDC since the [earlier] 2002 evaluation."

The Community Multimedia Centre (CMC) programme, a major programme of UNESCO's Communication and Information Sector (CI), has also recently been evaluated. Launched five years ago, it is moving towards a second phase with a scale-up in some countries, and mainstreamed support. Generally, the evaluation is positive: "The CMCs are accepted by and fully integrated into the communities and can in many cases be sustained beyond the pilot phase without core operating grants... Longer term benefits are already being realised within individual communities, such as the gradual removal of barriers to social inclusion, the stimulation of poverty alleviation through access to knowledge of better health, resource management and agriculture practices, through the establishment of listeners clubs as self help groups... and the creation of new livelihoods opportunities" (UNESCO, 2006b).

Shortcomings were identified, among them: Strong and consistent field support from UNESCO regional offices for the initiative, with one exception, is missing; efforts to achieve financial sustainability may be forcing CMC managers to target services at those who can pay, limiting access for the poor; there is a heavy reliance on volunteers; and the strategic timeframe for the initiative is unclear, as are benchmarks to assess the value of the initiative to UNESCO itself.

Perhaps relating to this last, some within UNESCO appear to question whether it is appropriate to be involved in scale-up (a footnote in the evaluation report notes that the sector denies this), and there is some confusion as to long-term objectives for the CMCs. This latter is interesting, and possibly arises from the unique nature

10 For more information see: <www.itu.int/council/wsis/wsis_WG.html> and <www.ungis.org>.

of this programme and the considerable resources that it consumes. The report recommends the devolution of scale-up to the regional offices, and more support there, and that the head office should provide tools, training, exchanges and a global focus, and accelerate efforts with member states to create an enabling policy environment.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that UNESCO still faces a considerable task in coming years to persuade many more member states, against opposition from the US, to ratify the Convention on Cultural Diversity. In December 2006 a total of 35 had ratified it, lifting the number above the minimum requirement of 30, thus making it enter into force in March 2007. The international campaign led by a group of member countries and NGOs to obtain additional ratifications is continuing, however, since the legitimacy and applicability of the Convention will be proportional to the number of states that ratify, accept, approve or adhere to it.

Stakeholder participation

At the institutional level, UNESCO has a strong commitment to gender equality, in particular through the Section for Women and Gender Equality and the actions to support mainstreaming across all UNESCO programmes. Similarly, there is significant institutional support for civil society participation within UNESCO, among the strongest and most elaborate of the UN agencies, and it is legally underpinned by its Constitution. Yet participation in these formal structures by Southern NGOs and civil society organisations appears to be weak, accounting for around 15% of the total. The actual level of Southern influence will to some extent depend on whether the international associations and NGOs, mostly based in OECD countries, have strong Southern membership and reflect their concerns through their UNESCO interactions. No information is available on this matter.

Support for wider developing country participation in UNESCO derives not from any specific legal or institutional form, but rather permeates throughout the organisation's strategy and programmes. Ultimately, Southern participation is safeguarded by its democratic membership and voting structures.

In the WSIS, UNESCO attempted, with some success, to open its activities to and support the efforts of civil society participation beyond its own NGO associates. UNESCO offered some limited direct support for participation to civil society from the South (though in the absence of figures it is not possible to assess whether this increased the proportion of Southern participants beyond the 15% in formal UNESCO NGO structures). While it was useful and did make a difference, UNESCO itself would agree that it was insufficient to redress the balance. UNESCO also ran several of its WSIS events in the South, including global events, in an effort to raise participation there and to ensure a greater focus on these issues.

Overall, UNESCO was amongst the strongest supporters of civil society in the WSIS process. Especially during the early stages, UNESCO invested significantly in events and processes designed to build civil society capacity, establish linkages and support effective intervention within the WSIS. Later they followed through by ensuring that their events were open to all stakeholders. They went to some

trouble to ensure that civil society organisations beyond NGOs accredited to UNESCO were informed, welcomed and could participate.

In the WSIS follow-up, in accordance with paragraphs 108 to 109 of the Tunis Agenda, all meetings were open to all stakeholders, and registration was provided online. There are, however, those who believe UNESCO has begun the follow-up process with a somewhat *dirigiste* tone, including several complaints from civil society participants that key decisions at the initial multi-stakeholder meetings, such as the division into sub-themes, were announced at the start of the meeting and only subsequently discussed.

Unfortunately, UNESCO does not compile systematic data on the gender and national breakdown of participants in the various events and other activities, or whether they belong to civil society organisations. A quantitative analysis of these issues was thus not possible.

Conclusions and recommendations

UNESCO is by Constitution and orientation well-disposed towards communication and information issues, taking a broader view than some others who have espoused the idea of an information society. Since its experience of the 1980s with the NWICO it has adopted a pragmatic, sometimes restrictive, view of the breadth of its remit in relation to the free flow of information, generally steering clear of antagonising Western and corporate interests. This is a pity since many of the key concerns in that debate, such as concentration of media ownership into a handful of Northern corporations, are of even greater concern now than they were then. UNESCO remains the most appropriate UN forum in which to debate the implications of this and other trends. Nevertheless, UNESCO can be responsive to its majority membership of Southern governments, and in certain core areas such as cultural diversity, it pursues a relatively strong line.

UNESCO's key legal instruments – declarations, conventions and recommendations – rely strongly on their moral authority, having limited legal efficacy, but can be effective in bringing together protagonists and antagonists and developing areas of mutual understanding.

UNESCO came well prepared for the WSIS, having flirted a few years earlier with the idea of its own intergovernmental event on information and communication for development. It engaged very early on with the ITU and the WSIS process, enhancing the participation of civil society, including to some extent those from the South, in the overall process.

Its decision to focus on the theme "Towards Knowledge Societies" contributed to a broadening of the debate within the overall WSIS process, which significantly enriched opportunities for interaction among those involved on these issues, issues that would otherwise have been marginalised.

Nevertheless, for a number of reasons, UNESCO's impact on the eventual WSIS outcome in substantive terms was limited, due largely to limitations within the overall WSIS process itself. Some issues that it promoted, such as universal access to information and quality education, gained a relatively high profile, though less so in the case of cultural diversity and certainly freedom of expression. Yet relatively narrow government participation, confined mainly to technical and

infrastructure ministries, in combination with other factors finally meant that even those issues with a high profile made little substantive progress.

UNESCO has continued its commitment by taking responsibility for a major role in the WSIS follow-up process. Yet for the reasons mentioned above, significant outcomes are likely, at most, only in some carefully targeted areas. The multi-stakeholder teams have a hill to climb in terms of establishing their credibility with existing actors in their respective areas, and in identifying those areas in which an impact is possible.

Having said this, the likelihood of success in narrow but significant areas is reinforced by the successful progress of internal strategic reorientation achieved by UNESCO as a result of the WSIS process. ■

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